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THE GOSPEL OF JOHN FROM THE STANDPOINT OF GREEK TRAGEDY

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The purpose of this article is, not to prove that the Gospel of John is a Greek drama, consciously modeled and artificially arranged with reference to the dramatic unities, but to present evidence that there is a close parallelism of form and method between it and the great Greek tragedies.

A discussion of the date, authorship, and object of the gospel lies beyond our present purpose; but a few generally accepted characteristics of the gospel may be noted as introductory. The Fourth Gospel is different from the Synoptics in both method and style. The method is subjectively rather than historically controlled; the style is dramatic not historical. It is not the story of the life of the Man of Nazareth, but a highly subjective presentation of the supernatural Christ. It is not the purpose of this gospel to give a full account of the earthly ministry of Jesus. It is silent concerning his work, save on a few special occasions which illustrate the theme it announces. Whole months are passed over in silence. The events of only a little over twenty days are recorded in any detail, and in every case they are presented from a special point of view best stated in the author's own words, "These are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and that believing ye may have life in his name" (20:31). The book originated in Asia Minor in an atmosphere surcharged with Greek speculative thought, and reflects an early effort to adapt Christianity to new conditions. Gnosticism was spreading. Speculation concerning Jesus and his work was rife. Irenæus states that the gospel was written to counteract the teachings of Cerinthus, who in true gnostic fashion separated God from the world-maker, whom he made a subordinate intermediate being. Cerinthus also distinguished the earthly being Jesus from the heavenly Messiah who descended upon the man Jesus at his baptism and became the

Word incarnate. In opposition to this theory, and in modification of Philo's doctrine of the Logos as the intermediary between God and the world, John asserted that "the Word was God" and that the Word in Jesus became flesh, a thesis which he sought to prove by reference to his earthly life. It is from this standpoint that the gospel should be studied. The prologue states that that Word, who in Jesus became incarnate, was pre-existent, the creator of the world, the life of men. The subsequent narrative is based upon these presuppositions, which give a unique character to this gospel.

A brief reference to the general characteristics of the Greek tragedy will assist the reader to the special standpoint of this paper. From the first, Greek tragedy had a religious significance. It began with the worship of Dionysos, and grew out of the choral song and dance which accompanied his festivals, but came to be the means of presenting the noblest traditions of the nation and the grandest themes of human thought. The great Greek tragedies were not mere entertainments. They were, rather, serious productions, expressing the convictions of the national conscience, the hopes and fears of the profoundest minds grappling with the mysteries of life. They were presented at the great religious festivals and voiced all that was noble and uplifting in Greek life. They were earnest attempts to reveal God or moral purpose in history, to explain the meaning of providence. Thus tragedy, no longer confined to trifling local myths or to the mad orgies and ecstasies of the worship of Dionysos, became the nearest approach to a Bible which Greece produced. Aristotle's saying that the motive of tragedy was to purify the feelings and passions by the exalted exercise of them, is certainly true of the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The mysteries of fate, of sin and judgment, of suffering and atonement, of human frailty and struggle, of divine justice, are here treated in a way to command our own serious attention.

In the actual presentation of Greek tragedy there was at first little in the way of stage setting and almost no acting, in our modern sense. So long as there was only a single actor, who was often the poet himself, he merely related events which occurred elsewhere. A chorus always assisted. Aeschylus is said to have introduced a second actor, and Sophocles, a third, thus making it possible to act events in the theater itself, although the acting was of the simplest

sort. Yet this simplicity deepened the effect upon the mind and heart of those who saw and heard. Much of the action, such as battles, etc., did not take place on the stage itself but was recounted by a messenger. The stage was the place for soliloquy, debate, plotting, and pleading, for the whole range of human emotions. The ponderous mask and buskins precluded much movement or facial expression. The appeal was made directly to the intellect and emotions through the medium of song and speech. Those who have witnessed one of these masterpieces presented by modern actors can form some conception of the deep emotion which must have held a Greek audience with breathless interest when originally produced. The weirdness, the sense of a mighty power moving resistless to its appointed goal despite the effort of the mightiest of kings and warriors, brings one face to face with life's strange reversals and unfathomed mysteries.

Is there any evidence that there is a relationship between these creations of Greek genius and our Fourth Gospel? According to the traditional view the apostle John was, for about twenty-five years, a resident of the Greek cities of Asia Minor. He was in daily contact with Greek influences. He wrote his gospel in an atmosphere filled with Greek conceptions of life. He made use of the Greek language in expressing his thought. He must have known much concerning Greek customs and ideas. The great theaters, like the one at Ephesus, which was the alleged home of the apostle for years, were certain to attract attention. Greek converts to Christianity would very naturally refer to the dramas which so profoundly influenced the national life and through them he may easily have known something of the works of Sophocles and Euripides. Is it unreasonable to suppose that as he looked back over the more than half-century which had elapsed since the crucifixion of his Master and pondered upon the mysteries of Jesus' earthly life and death, upon his vast and growing significance for the whole world, and then faced the speculative heresies which were denying that Jesus was what the disciple conceived him to be, John would, half unconsciously, have reflected something of the spirit of Greek tragedy in his story of the struggle and fate of Jesus? If the author was, as many scholars think, not John the disciple, but an unknown Christian of the second century, the possibility—may I not say the probability—of this personal contact with the Greek

drama is increased. In either case it is all but certain that our author knew somewhat concerning the great masterpieces of literature that appealed so deeply to the Greek world.

Coming directly to the evidence in the gospel itself that it is in spirit closely akin to Greek tragedy, we note first of all that the *theme is similar*. "The subject uppermost in the teaching of Aeschylus is the relation of Man, God, and Fate." The same is essentially true of the dramas of Sophocles and Euripides. Fate, however, was not regarded as mere caprice. While man's destiny involved mystery, it had moral significance. Eternal justice was back of all. Gods and men move on to meet its decrees. The closing lines of *Oedipus Coloneus* sum up the Greek conception in these words:

For know, 'tis all
Decreed by fate, and all the work of Heaven.

The theme of the Gospel is essentially the superhuman in its play upon the human, and the crime and folly of men in refusing to accept the divine, to receive the light. Theologically stated it is the presentation to the world of the divine Word made flesh, as its savior and his rejection by the Jews, "his own." Jesus came, not to do his own will but the will of the Father that sent him (6:38). Throughout the gospel this relation between natural and supernatural is maintained (cf. 1:51; 13:1).

The gospel begins with a prologue (1:1-18) in which not only is the theme stated, but the issue is forecast. Light comes into the world, but it is not apprehended. Euripides begins each play (save the *Iphigenia at Aulis*, which seems to have been incomplete at the poet's death) with a prologue in which he makes known to his audience the events which lead up to the play and frequently outlines what is to follow. Aeschylus in the *Persians* employs the chorus for a similar purpose. This brings us to the consideration of the prominent part played in Greek tragedy by the chorus. Throughout the presentation of the play, at pauses in the acting, the chorus sang lyrical poems, having reference to the subject, often by way of suggestion rather than by direct explanation, and serving to give color and setting to the thought and also to render more effective the impression produced by the spoken parts. (Cf. "The Praise of Athens," *Oed. Col.* 1:9, and the

Prayers in the *Supplicants*.) Frequently also the choral parts in the dialogue proper explained to the audience the meaning of the events presented, and many of the plays ended with a chant by the chorus in which the moral is given point. There are several passages in the gospel which serve the same general purpose as the chorus. Besides the prologue compare 3:31 ff., 12:37 ff., and 20:30, 31.

The discourses of Jesus remind one of the passages in the Greek plays in which one character speaks at great length,¹ not in a familiar, conversational manner, but in an exalted, poetical vein. Monologues, like those of Prometheus, Creon, Ajax, etc., in which these characters voice the age-long hopes and fears and passions of the human soul, may be compared with 5:19-47 and chap. 17.

The action of the gospel considered as a drama centers in the opposition of the Jews to Jesus, culminating in his crucifixion. As the hero of the tragedy moves on to his fate, often impelled by forces beyond his control, so the gospel represents Jesus as borne on by the divine will to his cross. The prologue contrasts those that "received him not" and those that "received him." In the second chapter, when the two parties to the controversy first meet, it is in open, acute opposition. Jesus, with a scourge of cords, cleanses the temple, and charges the Jews with desecrating that sacred place. Even thus early he predicts his death (2:19), and throughout his ministry he is represented as living under the deepening shadow of his cross, as looking forward to "his hour." This overshadowing cloud of coming fate reminds us of Oedipus Coloneus who (Act I, 3), finding himself in the grove sacred to Neptune predicts—

. . . . here at last
I shall have rest
. . . . and finish here
A life of misery.

Although the Jews succeed in their determination to be rid of this troubler of ecclesiastical authority, we are told at the very beginning of the struggle that Jesus will rise again (2:19). The action proceeds therefore after the manner of a Greek tragedy, in which, in contrast to our modern drama, the audience knew from the first how affairs would terminate. The interest centered not on curiosity and surprise

¹ Monologues of from fifty to one hundred lines occur. The opening chorus to the *Supplicants* contains 189 lines; to *Agamemnon*, 235 lines (cf. Potter's translation).

in the plot, as with us, but upon the development of a well-known theme. The epic poems, as well as the great tragedies, were all strictly limited in theme to the realm where mythology and history blend and gods and men live together. Fiction, in the modern sense of pure invention of the plot, was thus excluded. The Greek dramatists, however, exercised great freedom in treating the details of the myths, idealizing, presenting the familiar story, each in his own way, and making prominent those features of the myth which served the immediate purpose. The writer of the Fourth Gospel has dealt with the outline of Jesus' life in precisely the same manner, as a comparative study of the gospels reveals. Compare, e. g., Matt. 16:15, 16 with John 1:42, 49.

In this connection another evidence of kinship between our gospel and the Greek drama comes to view. The drama began in an unmoral age and dealt with myths which likewise reflect an undeveloped ethical sense. Many features of the older myths were repugnant to the growing refinement and more sensitive tastes of later ages. One of the greatest services rendered by the drama in its palmy period was the purification of the mythology and the recasting of the old stories, so as to bring them into closer harmony with the moral standards of the time. The dramatists were the higher critics of the Greek religion and did not a little to interpret the spirit of the myths while relieving them of their cruder, grosser features.² In like manner the author of the gospel writes to present to the world a conception of Christ which the age demanded. He brings to his readers a picture of the glory of the Word—"glory as of the only begotten from the Father"—in order that "ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and that believing ye may have life in his name" (1:14; 20:31). This is the picture which caught and fascinated the attention of the early church and which found expression in the great ecumenical creeds. It has often been noted that the gospel of John lacks almost wholly the ethical teaching of the synoptists.³ The Sermon on the

² Compare Gunkel's theory that the original Jacob-stories praised his clever duplicity.

³ Cf. *Ecce Homo*, Preface Supplementary, p. vi: "The author of the Fourth Gospel . . . does not speak definitely of the forgiveness of injuries or of the duty of relieving men's physical wants." Compare, also, *The Morals of Jesus*, by Thomas Jefferson, which makes but little use of our gospel.

Mount and the parables are wanting. The reason seems to lie in its endeavor to present a Christ who will meet the religious needs and command the religious devotion of the age. How great the success was, the creeds bear witness; for the creeds are almost silent concerning man's duty to his brother, although they bristle with theological formulae which are designed to exalt Jesus as divine.

Parallel to the opposition of the Jews is the growing intimacy of the disciples with Jesus culminating, after the sorrowful experiences attending the crucifixion, in the gift of the Holy Spirit, and of power to forgive and retain sins (20:22, 23). The gospel ends in an atmosphere of mystery and turns our thoughts to things unseen and eternal—to Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, who now moves in the realm of the supernatural—appearing and vanishing from sight without regard to natural laws.⁴ In a sense evil has been outwitted by the interference of the supernatural. Justice has triumphed in the resurrection of Jesus. Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate, though they have crucified Jesus, are nevertheless themselves unable to escape the judgment of the king of truth. How like this is to the ending of the Greek tragedies, all familiar with the subject will at once recognize. (Compare Sophocles' *Antigone*, Euripides' *Medea* (the chorus), Aeschylus' *Persians*, in which Xerxes is informed that he has been defeated by the god of war.) Indeed, while the tragedy often left the audience in perplexity and failed to clear away the mysteries of human destiny, sometimes even seeming to reach conclusions which lie athwart the beaten paths of human experience, it always assumes that the gods know if mortals do not and that behind the unlifted veil eternal justice reigns. "Thou may'st not know this now; forbear t' inquire," is a message from Greek tragedy, not unlike that from the gospel itself (13:7; 16:12).

To a surprising degree do we find in these tragedies anticipations, not only of the main motives and movements of the gospel, but of details as well. Many of these minor parallelisms might be pointed out; but they are omitted here lest the charges of special pleading and

⁴ One is reminded here of the way in which the gods intrude and arbitrarily interfere with the expected course of events. Occasionally a god was hoisted aloft on a crane over the stage to pronounce from mid-air (*ex machina*) some decree of fate (cf. 12:28 ff.).

of what Dr. Schaff used to call *imposition*, be brought against the whole argument. Besides, it is not in any number of such isolated correspondences, however suggestive they may be from other stand-points, that the value of this article is to be judged. That the poets and philosophers of the Greek world should have many thoughts in common with the writers of the New Testament is just what we should expect. What concerns us now is the remarkable similarity of method and spirit in conveying these thoughts, which exists between Greek tragedy and the Fourth Gospel. As literature, they have a close affinity in motive, development, and climax. The love of philosophy, so characteristic of the Greek temperament, that intellectual ferment which St. Paul noted in the Athenians, so that they "spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing," very naturally led to comparisons between Christianity and other religious systems and to various attempts to combine them. The influence of this eclecticism appears somewhat in the earlier Neoplatonism, but more notably in Gnosticism. The writer of the Fourth Gospel, from the Christian standpoint in combating this tendency to undermine the divinity of Christ, seems to have adopted the very method of expressing the truth which would appeal most powerfully to the mind and heart of the Greek world.

One is surprised to discover how little descriptive narrative and how much dialogue and discourse the Fourth Gospel contains. Chapter after chapter can be rewritten in dramatic form with no violence to the text. Take for example 6:25-71, or 8:12-59, or chap. 9. The action is as intense, the debate as pointed and earnest, as any in all literature, while the transcendent importance of the events themselves places the gospel story in a class by itself. Considered solely from the standpoint of dramatic power, what can compare with the judgment scene, with its contrasts between the frenzy and relentless hatred of the Jews, the cowardice of the politic Pilate, and the majesty of Jesus? If the reader will rewrite the entire gospel in dramatic form, the work will prove most rewarding. The author hopes that the gospel will at least be read through in connection with the following synopsis. The suggested divisions into act and scene are, of course, purely arbitrary and are used simply to illustrate this method of studying the book. Remember also that this is not an attempt to

dramatize the gospel by reading new material into it, but a study of it from a special literary and historical point of view.

If the reader can in imagination seat himself in the vast open-air amphitheater at Ephesus among the crowds who, with expectant hush and tense sympathy, witnessed the tragedy, the parallel I am seeking to present will be more apparent. The chorus enters and chants the prologue, its minor note of regret almost lost in the outburst of praise to "the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father." John the Baptist gives his fearless testimony, "Behold the Lamb of God." The first disciples enter and follow Jesus, "The Messiah." The ease with which the gospel lends itself to this form of presentation will become apparent to anyone who tries it, and combined with the facts already noted, serves to convince the writer that there is a close relationship between Greek tragedy and our Fourth Gospel.

ACT I: THE PROLOGUE

SCENE 1 (1:1-14). The theme announced: The divine Word made flesh rejected by the Jews, conferring divine sonship on all who receive him.

(1:15-34). John the Baptist witnesses to the supernatural origin of Jesus and his Messiahship. Note that John is not a preacher of repentance, but a herald of the Messiah.

(1:35-2:11). The chorus recounts the call of the first disciples and the first "sign" at Cana. Observe that Jesus is from the first regarded as a supernatural being. He changes Simon's name, anticipating what the synoptists record later. He sees Nathanael under the fig-tree and "knows" him, bringing *at once* the confession, "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art king of Israel." Jesus predicts that Nathanael will "see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." It is also to be remarked that the miracles attributed to Jesus in this gospel are all remarkable marvels: e. g., water turned into wine; the nobleman's son healed at a distance, the man *born* blind, and the man *thirty-eight* years in an infirmity are the only instances of healing; Lazarus dead *four days* is raised to life.

SCENE 2 (2:13-22). The temple cleansed at the Passover. The two principal parties to the action are introduced, Jesus and the Jews. Note the abruptness, even violence, with which the controversy begins. The Jews demand a "sign." Jesus predicts his resurrection.

SCENE 3 (3:1-21). The interview between Jesus and Nicodemus reveals the superiority of Jesus to the "teacher of Israel" and one of the noblest of the Israelites. The chorus chants the sublime passage 3:16-21.

SCENE 4 (3:22-36). The dispute between John's disciples and a Jew about

purifying leads John to witness to Christ. The chorus takes up the theme, vss. 31-36.

SCENE 5 (4:1-54). The conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, in which Jesus proclaims himself the Messiah, proving it by telling the woman "all things that ever she did." Note that the Samaritans and Galileans "received him," while the Jews did not. The chorus relates the story of healing the nobleman's son.

ACT II

The progress of the struggle as it centers on religious forms and ceremonies.

SCENE 1 (5:1-47). The healing of the infirm man at Bethesda leads to a controversy over the Sabbath law and the authority of Moses. The Jews persecute Jesus.

SCENE 2 (6:1-71). The feeding of the five thousand leads to a dispute in the synagogue at Capernaum over the meaning of Moses' sign, "the manna." Jesus loses popularity by announcing himself the true bread from heaven.

SCENE 3 (7:1-9). Even his own brothers do not believe on him. He avoids Judea for fear of the Jews.

ACT III

The stage of acute opposition is reached. Open violence is attempted.

SCENE 1 (7:14-52). The first attempt to arrest Jesus is made during the Feast of Tabernacles, but his hour has not come. The officers report, "Never man so spake."

SCENE 2 (8:12-59). The attempt is made to entrap Jesus in his speech and to argue him to silence. Note the bitterness of the debate: "Thou hast a demon;" "Ye are of your father, the devil." The Jews take up stones to kill him.

SCENE 3 (9:1-10:21). The man born blind is healed on a Sabbath, and because he confesses Jesus a prophet, is cast out of the synagogue. Jesus' discourse concerning the Good Shepherd.

SCENE 4 (10:22-41). The Jews attempt to stone Jesus in Solomon's Porch at the Feast of Dedication, because he, "being a man, made himself God."

ACT IV

The Jews take counsel to put Jesus to death, not by violence, but by plot.

SCENE 1 (11:1-46). The resurrection of Lazarus wins new converts.

SCENE 2 (11:47-57). The Jews are angry at the success of Jesus and fear political complications. They decide that it is expedient that one man die, and that the whole nation perish not.

SCENE 3 (12:1-11). The supper at Bethany discloses the beginning of Judas' treachery. The Jews seek to put Lazarus to death.

SCENE 4 (12:12-19). The open assumption of messianic honors at the triumphal entry into the temple rouses the Jews to a frenzy.

SCENE 5 (12:20-50). The gentiles seek Jesus, while the Jews are rejecting him. The voice from heaven.

SCENE 6 (13:1-17:26). The farewell discourse and the last supper with the disciples. The self-consciousness of Jesus as he meets his hour and his solicitousness for his disciples, his words of comfort and high-priestly prayer form a vivid contrast to the ceaseless controversies with the Jews.

ACT V

The plot of the Jews succeeds, but throughout Jesus is superior to his circumstances; never compelled, always voluntarily yielding. There is no mention made of the agony in the garden or on the cross. Jesus is sustained by supernatural forces through which he rises victorious.

SCENE 1 (18:1-14). When arrested in the garden, he is not seized as a helpless victim. His majestic presence causes his enemies to fall to the ground. He gives himself up of his own accord.

SCENE 2 (18:15-27). The trial before Annas is accompanied by the denial of Peter.

SCENE 3 (18:28-19:16). John omits the trial before Caiaphas and does not mention that before Herod. The calm superiority of Jesus to Pilate and the utter lack of reason or justice in the Jews who seek his death make this passage one of the most vivid in all literature.

SCENE 4 (19:17-42). John gives very few details concerning the crucifixion. Even on the cross Jesus "fulfils the Scripture." The chorus relates the story of the death and burial.

SCENE 5 (20:1-31). The chorus tells the story of the empty tomb and the appearance to Mary. Jesus appears to his disciples and confers the power of the Holy Ghost.

Here the action, the progress of events, comes to its conclusion. Through death Jesus passes to life and by the direct exercise of divine power thwarts the plot of his enemies to destroy him. To the disciples is given the power to forgive or to retain sins, implying authority over the Jews who had so persistently persecuted their Master.

This study of the gospel emphasizes the following facts:

1. The Fourth Gospel is not only the gospel of love, but also the gospel of controversy. This need not surprise us, for nowhere can there be a greater antagonism or a deeper antipathy than that existing between infinite love and selfishness and pride as these pass into a frenzy of hate toward the goodness which is their condemnation. Jesus, love incarnate, who came to give abundant life to men, meets the opposition of these Jews who are unwilling to surrender selfish privilege. No power of indignation, no incentive to action can be

greater than these two: love opposed to selfishness and selfishness exposed by love. In the gospel this greatest conflict of the ages is fought out to the end.

2. The Fourth Gospel is the gospel of supernaturalism. The point over which the controversy rages is the claim of Jesus to supernatural power and to a peculiar relation to God. He is superior not only to Moses' law, but to physical law. He assumes superiority to Nicodemus, "the teacher of Israel," condemns the injustice of the high-priest, and stands before the Roman governor as an avowed king. This study has its obvious limitations; but it is this background of the supernatural and this ceaseless struggle with circumstances which make the Fourth Gospel in spirit closely akin to the great masterpieces of Greek genius.

A thousand shapes our varying fates assume;
The gods perform what we could least expect;
And oft the things for which we fondly hoped
Come not to pass; but Heaven still finds a clue
To guide our steps through life's perplexing maze,
And thus does this important business end.

—EURIPIDES.